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With state road-widening projects slowing to a crawl and a spring referendum to finance local traffic improvements defeated at the polls, options for fighting growth-driven gridlock in Lake County are few and far between.

As a result, the county's successful efforts over the past several years to secure federal funding for the establishment of a local Intelligent Transportation System seem more important than ever.

On Tuesday, officials held a ceremonial groundbreaking for a new traffic management center in Libertyville, a facility that will serve as the heart of the county's new smart traffic initiative, dubbed Lake County Passage.

"To live in Lake County is to be stuck in traffic," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park. "For the average driver, this system allows us to provide many more green lights in the appropriate direction and increase speed."

Kirk noted the system, which will include 20 miles of fiber optic communications connecting almost 200 major state and county intersections to the traffic management center, will allow operators to "burn a strip of green lights" for ambulances and fire vehicles to greatly increase emergency response time.

U.S. Rep. Philip Crane, R-Wauconda, said the system will allow operators to inform motorists about traffic and road conditions "in real time" and that the managed traffic improvements will translate to speedier delivery time and the resulting economic benefits for commercial interests.

Kirk and Crane were key players in securing about \$3.5 million in federal funding for the system over the past four years. The Illinois Department of Transportation is also participating in the project and officials hope that in later phases, municipalities will hook up to the system in key areas.

Actual construction of the \$1.3 million traffic management center is scheduled to begin July 12, with occupancy of the new facility scheduled for June of next year.

The 4,700-square-foot center is to be built on the south side of the Lake County Division of Transportation building at 600 Winchester Road.

Inside the new center, operators will monitor data from video cameras, traffic control systems and the Lake County Sheriff's Dispatch Center to identify accidents, signal malfunctions and unusual congestion.

"It will provide more effective incident management," said County Board member Diana O'Kelly of Mundelein, chairman of the board's Public Works and Transportation Committee. "If something goes wrong, someone will know immediately and take corrective action."

Variable message signs and a highway advisory radio system will inform commuters about traffic conditions and any special problems.

"Congestion and traffic are the biggest problem in Lake County," said County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt of Lake Villa. "This will make things a little more palatable while on the road."